



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## WHAT GOVERNMENT BY COMMISSION HAS ACCOMPLISHED IN DES MOINES

---

BY JOHN J. HAMILTON,

Author of "Government by Commission; or, The Dethronement of the City Boss."

---

Good government has become a matter of course in Des Moines since the first commission took charge of the city's affairs in April, 1908; and the unpleasant memories of the old regime are already fading into forgetfulness, though not yet gilded with the radiance which often brightens disagreeable events long after they have happened.

The keynote of the old order was the phrase, "divisive strife," coined by the publisher of one of the Des Moines newspapers to describe the perpetual wrangling, usually without results, which attended the consideration of municipal questions. In the new administration, the dominant note is harmony. The community acts as a unit on all large matters; and this accord is seen in equal measure in the minor details of city business. There is much discussion, and sharp differences of opinion arise; but the affairs of the city receive such prompt attention that divisions among the citizens do not, as formerly, become chronic or degenerate into futile and senseless factionism. Democracy is necessarily a noisy type of government, but commission government in Des Moines has demonstrated that it does not necessarily behave itself unseemly.

A somewhat elementary description of the styles of municipal management before and since 1908, will perhaps best serve my purpose of showing by contrast what has been accomplished by abolishing the mayor-and-council form and substituting government by a commission of five members. This will probably convince the reader that most of the features of bad municipal administration in Des Moines were typical of unsuccessful city government as it has long existed in American cities generally.

There were and are two townships and seven wards in the city;

and the wards were sub-divided into from three to five voting precincts each. The townships are separated by the Des Moines river, which flows south through the most densely populated parts of the city. The ward lines run north and south, parallel with the river; and four of the wards are on the west and three on the east side. The precinct lines generally run east and west. The number of precincts has been considerably increased since the change of administration, for convenience in voting. All of these divisions and subdivisions were tremendously important before the form of government was changed; but this factitious importance, arising from local jealousies cultivated by the old city hall "machine," has almost entirely disappeared.

Des Moines is a state capital, with the proneness to what is familiarly called "politics," characteristic of political centers; and the tendency to play the game of politics for a living—the bane of public life in this country—was especially strong on the east side, where the state house is located. The east township, Lee, always acted unitedly in conventions and usually in primary elections; and in both political and administrative affairs, was successfully played against a divided west side, where most of the business men and so-called "silk stocking" element reside and do business. It became an axiom in local affairs that this successfully manipulated section must be conciliated before any important local enterprise could be put through. If a bridge, viaduct, or public building was needed, the necessary expenditure could be approved only by an agreement that a like amount should be appropriated for the east side, whether needed or not. This was only one of many sorts of "log-rolling" which attended the preparation of budgets and other transactions calling for public funds. Wards and precincts, severally and in combination, contested for appropriations in a continual strife in which the interests of the community as a whole were scarcely considered and often not even mentioned.

The townships, wards and precincts were, with few exceptions, controlled by professional politicians. In electing ward aldermen, local or precinct candidates, representing either some demand for an appropriation or a popular desire for reform, were brought out by the machine or its opponents; and delegates were chosen in caucuses or primary elections and usually instructed to support these candidates in ward conventions. When reform movements

were general and earnest, three or four of the seven wards and one or both of the townships would nominate and elect men of good character and ability; and at long intervals men of such standing were able to dominate the council and check the prevailing tendencies to wastefulness and betrayal of the public interests. In times of popular indifference, the instructed delegations were, after fruitlessly balloting for the candidates they supposed themselves to represent, manipulated or cowed into compromising on the nomination of men previously selected by the political leaders because of their servility to selfish interests, political or commercial. Good councils were exceptional; and the best men who served in them usually retired at the end of the first term, disgusted and disheartened by the failure of their efforts to improve administration. There were not many councils that were regarded by the public as distinctly bad; but results were much the same whether the majority were aggressively opposed to good government or composed in part of respectable men of good instincts but low powers of resistance.

The popular demand for better things usually expressed itself when strongest, in the election of a mayor pledged to reform policies; and the vetoes interposed by such officials sometimes accomplished results negatively good; but the refusal of council after council to confirm appointments to the board of public works and other boards and commissions, unless dictated by the worst elements, frustrated the efforts of more than one mayor to put the administration on a basis of efficiency.

The most fundamental defect of the system was its failure to establish and locate responsibility. There was continual conflict of authority, and public work was subjected to vexatious and unreasonable delays. Even after the establishment of a civil service commission, pledged by law and oath to maintain a merit system, the office of mayor was one of the pawns in the game of state and federal politics; the rival candidates for congress often putting their respective partisans forward as aspirants for the mayoralty as the first step in securing control of the city, county, and district.

Despite laws prohibiting members of the council from being interested in city contracts for labor and materials, contractors got themselves elected to that body and were more than suspected of violating or evading such prohibitions. Employment of contractors, who were aldermen, by the public service corporations of the city

became a scandal. Work done by contract for the city was badly done, specifications ignored, and inspection of materials and construction reduced to a farce. The streets were dirty, the alleys unspeakably filthy, and sanitary measures were but half enforced. Padded payrolls and fictitious bills were becoming painfully frequent. Taxes were steadily increasing, but the city floundered along without a system of accounts which would show the state of its finances; and the inevitable result was annual deficits covered by the issue of warrants, often sold at a discount; and periodical additions to the city's bonded debt. There was a steady multiplication, through state laws and municipal ordinances, of taxing bodies, which acted without communication or coherence of plan.

The defective character of the municipal organization as an agency for the transaction of business was shown by countless cases of neglect to take ordinary precautions in purchasing ground or materials certain to be needed. A steel bridge erected across the Des Moines river was for years left high in the air at both ends because the city had failed to purchase land for the approaches and, naturally, could not agree with the owners afterwards. The voting of extras to contractors in many cases neutralized the benefits which might have resulted from competition in bidding for the work.

Morally, the city administration was at a low ebb. The laws against gambling and prostitution were, under many administrations, openly ignored and offenses against them compounded by the acceptance of periodical fines, supplemented, it was well known, by gratuities to members of the city hall "gang;" with the usual accompaniments of straw bonds and failure to collect them when forfeited. Gross favoritism in the enforcement of the city ordinances on many subjects was practiced. Constant suspicion and frequent scandal attended the relations of the city to the public service corporations.

It was to a community which for the life of a generation had, with admirable tenacity and almost incredibly surviving hope, struggled against an insolent and domineering cabal, perpetrating and defending such misgovernment and ruthlessly violating election laws in perpetuating its power, that the commission form of government, first exemplified at Galveston, brought deliverance. The emancipation which came with the new type of municipal organization, was, therefore, most heartily welcomed. There has never been a moment when the people of Des Moines would have entertained a proposal

to go back to the old system. So thoroughly was the new charter digested and its provisions adjusted to the peculiar needs of the city that it is doubtful whether any material amendments could command popular support, after full consideration, such as the voters of Des Moines have been trained to give to municipal questions.

The immediate educational benefits to the electorate, and, indeed, to the entire community, were very great. The active movement for the change covered a period of nineteen months, from November, 1905, to June, 1907; and the two municipal elections which have since occurred and the continuous process of self-government under a really democratic system have maintained the interest of the people in their city government at a high point, without the periods of indifference and disgust which used to come between spasmodic efforts at reform. Prior to the inauguration of the first administration in 1908, the charter movement had passed through six stages, as follows: 1. Investigation of the Galveston charter; drafting of a similar plan of government for Des Moines, and its submission to, and defeat by, the Iowa legislature. 2. A protracted campaign of education by the Des Moines press. 3. A public debate between advocates of the Galveston and Indianapolis plans, resulting in an agreement among friends of all proposals to unite upon the Galveston system as a basis; and preparation, by a committee of five lawyers, of the charter substantially as adopted and known as "the Des Moines plan." 4. A prolonged, but finally successful effort to secure the enactment of the charter law by another legislature. 5. A bitterly contested special election resulting in the adoption of the charter by the people of the city by a large majority. 6. The election of the first commission to take over and conduct the city administration.

At every one of these stages, the condition of the city's affairs and the old and new methods of administering them, were thoroughly considered and discussed by the newspapers, by committees of citizens, by women's clubs, and by the general body of voters. The fullest and clearest light was thrown upon every phase of municipal activity. The qualifications of candidates, when the time came for the first primary and election, were discussed with frankness and decency. Throughout the entire period, the whole question, in all its phases, was distinctly in the public mind. This, in itself, was an unmingled good.

The unification of the city was the first large benefit accruing from the change. Wards which had persistently kept representatives in the council chamber whose presence there was an offense to the community, at once lost their power to perpetuate that injury to the common interests. They retained their proportionate voice and influence in selecting members of the council—now composed of five commissioners—but were compelled to accept the judgment of the entire city as to each place to be filled. Several "Bathhouse Johns" and "Hinky Dinks" were thus automatically eliminated from the governing body. Whatever may be said about the personnel of the two councils elected under the new plan, the members have all been the deliberate choice of all Des Moines. Every question decided, either directly, through the referendum, or indirectly, in the selection of commissioners, has been passed upon by Des Moines as one city.

The spirit of harmony resulting from thus making the city one organic whole has extended to every phase of the local life. Public spirit was wonderfully revived and the commercial and industrial activities of the city increased and brought results as never before. Many large undertakings, previously impracticable because of local jealousies, such as the building of a viaduct, the erection of a great convention hall, and the raising of large funds for buildings for the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations, were carried through with enthusiasm.

Directly responsible administration, made not only possible but inevitable through the very framework of the new government, showed immediate results in the prompt transaction of all city business, doing away with the dissatisfaction arising from procrastination. Even if public work had not been better done, this change, of itself, would have justified the abandonment of the old methods; but the public work was better done in every department. The introduction of modern bookkeeping, and the full publicity made effective thereby, as well as required by the provisions of the charter, acted powerfully as a corrective of municipal abuses. Scandals ceased in the police department, or were exposed and ended with crushing effectiveness. The social evil was dealt with in thorough-going fashion; and the scandal of a segregated vice district, periodical fines, straw bonds, and oppression and exploitation of fallen women were done away with. Work done by the

employees of the city was well done and contract work held strictly up to specifications. The payment of "extras" was discontinued. Payrolls were purged and sinecures abolished. The streets and alleys were effectively cleaned. A beautiful civic center on the river front was, without agitation or opposition, established. Cash discounts were taken on city purchases and interest collected on balances in the banks. Friendly, but business-like and mutually self-respecting relations with the public service corporations were maintained. Municipal elections were conducted quietly, decently, with little expenditure of money, and without the fraudulent registration, ballot-box stuffing, and other criminal and corrupt practices prevalent under the old regime. The city, for the first time in years, lived within its income. Taxes were reduced but little; but, inasmuch as far more was accomplished, better materials used, work more honestly done, and the piling up of city indebtedness for current expenses stopped, the actual result was equivalent to a heavy reduction. The public, being in full control of the situation at all times through the initiative, referendum, and recall, assumed a more reasonable and tolerant attitude toward the city authorities. The habit of grumbling about city affairs ceased to manifest itself.

Being reasonably well paid for all their time, the mayor and councilmen, as city commissioners, showed a tendency to become experts in their several departments. Direct responsibility and genuine opportunity to accomplish results strengthened this tendency. Expert service, as of engineers, attorneys, and architects, was employed with more regard for fitness and less for political expediency. Responsibility to the entire city, instead of to artificial sections of it, bred a larger breadth of view and developed official independence of the sort that respects real public opinion without being servile to popular prejudice.

One of the unsolved problems in Des Moines is that of the extent to which the individual commissioner, as head of a department, should be permitted to select his own most responsible subordinates and division chiefs. The community promptly upheld one commissioner of public safety in demanding this right when the council, by a majority vote which savored of political combination, foisted on him a chief of police regarded as personally unfit; but when the succeeding commissioner, who had not yet convinced the public of his sincerity in law enforcement, invoked the same rule

of business, insisting that, if held responsible for results, he must be permitted to choose his own chief, the same public was much less responsive. The public, in these two cases, showed a sort of opportunism, taking the position that commissioners should be accorded the practically unlimited right of selection when the citizens believed in them and denied it when there were doubts of their whole-heartedness in the public service. There are those who maintain that this right should always be conceded or the official denied it discharged—which, under the Des Moines plan, would usually mean recalled; but others regard the council of five as having a collective, corporate responsibility for the work of each department, which it should not waive except as a mark of special confidence in an unquestionably faithful and competent commissioner. These regard the public good as the paramount consideration and insist that rules of business practice are secondary to results. They contend that public and private business, though governed by the same general principles, are not absolutely alike; and that, at all events, experience shows that a city commission accomplishes the best results when acting as did the selectmen appointed by the old-time New England town meeting. This controversy has developed the most acute personal and political antagonisms which have arisen in Des Moines since the new regime began; but the commissioners whose relations have been strained because of it have both gone forward in their respective departments, doing good work and responding to the demands of a vigilant public sentiment.

One accomplishment of the new plan of government in Des Moines is in a sense somewhat unique and perhaps not likely to result, at least in the same degree, in other cities which adopt the plan. The city, widely advertised as a model of good municipal methods, has become acutely sensitive to the opinion of the country at large. The appeal to this wider tribunal has been very effective in local elections and administration. The feeling of *noblesse oblige* is peculiarly strong, almost morbidly so, one might suspect.

At every stage of the Des Moines experience, the local press, strong, clean and widely circulated, has been a powerful factor in making a success of the new plan. There has been no effort on the part of the newspapers of Des Moines to conceal or gloss over the shortcomings of the commission or its members. They have erred, if at all, in magnifying normal differences of opinion into

radical and serious clashes and in always revealing the seamy side of the municipal government and rarely its better aspects.

Commission government, in a word, has given Des Moines democracy. This, perhaps, is why it has given satisfaction. It is human nature to be pleased with one's own management of matters. Communities are in this respect very like individual men and women.

The results of the change of government are thus described by the present mayor, Hon. James R. Hanna, himself a thorough student of municipal problems:

"To state it very briefly, I think the commission plan has accomplished in Des Moines something like the following: (1) Directness, simplicity and therefore efficiency and economy in administration; (2) a very much greater responsiveness of the city government to public opinion; in other words, a more thoroughly democratic city government; (3) a very much greater civic interest and civic pride; (4) a great stimulation of the public to the undertaking of general public improvements; (5) the general unification of the city, making out of seven contending wards one united city; (6) a general cleaning up of the city politically, morally and physically.

"We have undertaken more permanent improvements in the last three years than were ever undertaken in any period of four times that length previously and we are proceeding to pay for these things; yet our municipal tax levy for the last three years has averaged 36.8 mills as against 39.4 mills during the eight years next preceding."